

VZCZCXRO5411
PP RUEHFL RUEHNP
DE RUEHMIL #0021/01 0480715
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 170715Z FEB 10
FM AMCONSUL MILAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1906
INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 9008
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY 0246
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 0241

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MILAN 000021

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2020

TAGS: [IT](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION LANDSCAPE: DOMINANT CENTER-RIGHT AND
WEAK OPPOSITION IN THE VENETO

Classified By: Consul General Carol Z. Perez for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. SUMMARY: (SBU) Heading into the March 28-29 regional elections, the political landscape in the Veneto, one of Italy's most politically and economically important regions, displays a dominant center-right coalition headed by a Northern League (LN) candidate and a weak and disorganized center-left opposition. The Northern League party is strong and growing stronger both in relation to the opposition and within its center-right coalition, due to increasing popular support for hard-line positions on security and immigration; the election of LN Agricultural Minister Luca Zaia as the region's next president is a foregone conclusion. The outcome of the regional election in the Veneto and elsewhere could change the balance of power between the LN and Popolo della Libertà (Pdl), Prime Minister Berlusconi's ruling party. In contrast to the center-right's strong and unified front, the center-left opposition is in disarray. In addition to its almost certain loss in the upcoming regional contest, the center-left Democratic Party (PD) faces the potential loss of the mayorship of Venice, a position that it has held for over twenty years.

Northern League: Strong Venetian Roots, and Growing Stronger

¶2. (SBU) With gubernatorial elections coming up on March 28-29, the Northern League (LN) party is in an extremely strong position in the economically and politically important Veneto region, both within its center-right coalition and vis--vis the center-left opposition. The center-right coalition has chosen an LN candidate, current Agriculture Minister Luca Zaia, to stand for election next month and officials from both the center-right and from the center-left, composed primarily of the Democratic Party (PD), agree that the LN has outmaneuvered its opponents in the region, reading the popular mood and appealing to an ever-broadening segment of the electorate.

¶3. (SBU) Crucial to the LN's regional appeal is its connection to the territory and its use of a unique, sometimes crude political rhetoric that appeals to Veneto voters. Home to the historically powerful and independent city-state of Venice, the Veneto maintains an identity that is proud of its achievements, especially in the economic realm, and is wary of outside interference. Northern League founder and leader Umberto Bossi has successfully parlayed the LN's flagship issue, fiscal federalism, into a broader platform of security and protection from outside threats, linking the rise in immigration with crime, unemployment, and a general degradation of Italian cultural identity. This political formula holds continued appeal for the LN's traditional electoral base, the small- and medium-sized business owners who make up the economic fabric of the Veneto, but this savvy platform fusing fiscal federalism and immigration has also had growing resonance with workers, a traditionally leftist bloc, whom LN leaders assert no longer

feel ""protected"" by the PD and other parties. The LN has made an increasingly convincing argument that unfairly high taxes imposed by Rome put people out of business and that immigrant workers take Italian jobs. Recently this second claim has been especially compelling, given the ever higher number of immigrants arriving in the Veneto and the global economic crisis, which has led to many job losses in the Veneto.

14. (SBU) LN rhetoric about immigration ranges from slightly protectionist to overtly xenophobic, and the LN has successfully linked immigrants to crime in the minds of an increasingly large swath of voters. LN policies at the local levels often focus on expelling illegal immigrants and ""cleaning up"" the often run-down neighborhoods in which they live - measures that citizens often perceive, in practical terms, as cleaning up the streets, reducing crime, and generally improving the quality of life. The opposition refutes the logic behind these measures as well as claims about their effectiveness, but even they admit that on the issue of security, the Northern League is king. A PD official from the city of Treviso noted that economic insecurity in Italy is the more salient issue, especially in the recent downturn, but that the LN has seized on physical security as its issue, which is easier to explain to voters, and has translated it into political gain.

Party of the People - and the Young

15. (SBU) Although many LN leaders would be reluctant to admit it, the Northern League in the Veneto draws heavily from Italy's former communist tradition and has retained that close, grass-roots connection to the electorate; supporters across the region refer glowingly to the LN as the only

MILAN 00000021 002 OF 003

""party of the masses"" and ""party of the people"" currently in the country. The LN has continued to expand its physical presence with numerous, accessible party offices and outposts that also double as community centers. LN leaders and voters alike boast that their mayors and councilmen are always out and about, talking to people and maintaining a personal relationship with their constituents - practicing what hugely popular Verona mayor Flavio Tosi has termed ""supermarket politics."" The LN's pervasive reputation for good public administration seems to stem directly from this responsiveness, accessibility, and visibility. Furthermore - largely due to its strong physical presence and proactive outreach in the region - the Northern League has successfully courted the youth vote and seems to be making great progress in cultivating the next generation of LN voters. A Treviso PD official said that in 2009 he organized a visit to Strasbourg for area teens to learn more about the EU Parliament, the first arranged by the region's Democratic Party in 15 years; over the same period, however, the Northern League has organized multiple similar trips per year.

Democratic Party Struggling for Coherence, Votes, and Venice

16. (SBU) In contrast to the Northern League's rise, the center-left in Veneto is struggling to put forward a cohesive platform and communicate a strong party identity to the electorate. The party is suffering from a declining share of the vote, and its loss in March's race for the regional presidency is virtually assured. The PD's choice for gubernatorial candidate displays the party's internal weakness and identity crisis; Venice city councilman Giuseppe Bortolussi is far from a typical Democrat, with an ideologically independent bent and a conservative, pro-business stance. Bortolussi - who, well before the announcement of his candidacy, told us that he did not want to run, but would ""obey"" if his party's leadership asked him to - has for over thirty years served as the director of the region's largest union of small- and medium-size business owners. In this capacity he has often led the charge against

higher taxes and central government interference, the LN,s traditional political territory, and has clashed openly with center-left governments headed by Pd Prime Ministers Prodi and D'Alema. The PD,s obvious attempt to challenge the center-right on its own terrain and appeal to the largest possible electorate is not likely to succeed.

¶17. (SBU) Another potential blow to the center-left would be the loss of the mayorship of Venice (which also holds elections in late March). While not particularly important politically, the city of Venice still has enormous cultural and social significance, and it has for over twenty years been a center-left stronghold. Outgoing PD mayor Massimo Cacciari has already served three terms in total, and the center-left candidate, elderly lawyer and former city councilman Giorgio Orsoni, is in a close race with the popular Minister of Public Administration Renato Brunetta (from Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Liberta party). Brunetta's mayoral run could be hurt by his stated desire to continue serving as a cabinet minister even if elected, but he remains a very popular figure among Venetians, and the race is definitely open.

¶18. (SBU) According to PD officials in the region, the party,s main problem lies in its inability to articulate a platform and its lack of organization, not in the quality of its governance. A PD official from Verona highlighted recent achievements by numerous PD mayors throughout the Veneto, but admitted that the party has been ineffective in communicating its successes to the electorate and translating them into votes. The party has also struggled to explain itself to voters in the region, a communication failure that has allowed the LN to take the mantle of "reform" from the PD. Additionally, unlike the LN, the PD has not built a robust physical presence, further removing it from the electorate and particularly the next generation of young voters. Lastly, despite several particularly talented Veneto PD politicians, the party has not successfully drawn the link to the territory that the LN has so masterfully done. Regional PD officials stressed that tying its platform more closely to the specific Veneto terrain is critical to any future level of success in the region. The PD failed to inherit the structure of the Italian Communist Party or the Christian Democrats - the parties from which it descended - and after a series of failures on the national and regional level, has struggled to set new roots down.

Comment: Jockeying for Power within the Ruling Coalition

¶19. (C) Because the center-right,s victory in the regional race is essentially assured, the real contest in the Veneto is within the majority coalition, between the Northern League and Prime Minister Berlusconi,s ruling Popolo della Libert (Pdl). While they are allies in the coalition, their relationship at the regional level and below is often tense, and the two parties display very different positions,

MILAN 00000021 003 OF 003

platforms, and political styles. While the LN has been strong in the Veneto for some time, this election cycle could be the first time that it actually overtakes the Pdl in the region; a recent poll conducted by northern Italian polling firm SWG predicts the LN will receive 33 percent of the vote, while the Pdl stands around 27 percent. While polls are imperfect predictors, the numbers are still striking to those both within and outside of the majority coalition. Because the parties in the winning coalition will divvy up positions based on the percentage of votes they have received, the LN is pushing to secure as many important regional political posts as possible. Additionally, the result of the regional elections in the Veneto and other Italian regions could shift the balance of power between the LN and Berlusconi,s Pdl at the national government level. In times of political weakness or vulnerability Berlusconi has already had to give concessions to LN government leaders in order to win support for his personal legislative agenda. With a strong enough showing in the March elections, and without a solid

opposition to block such measures, the LN could be in an even more powerful position to influence Italian national policy and assert its own security-based, anti-immigrant political ideology.

¶10. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Rome.

Perez

"